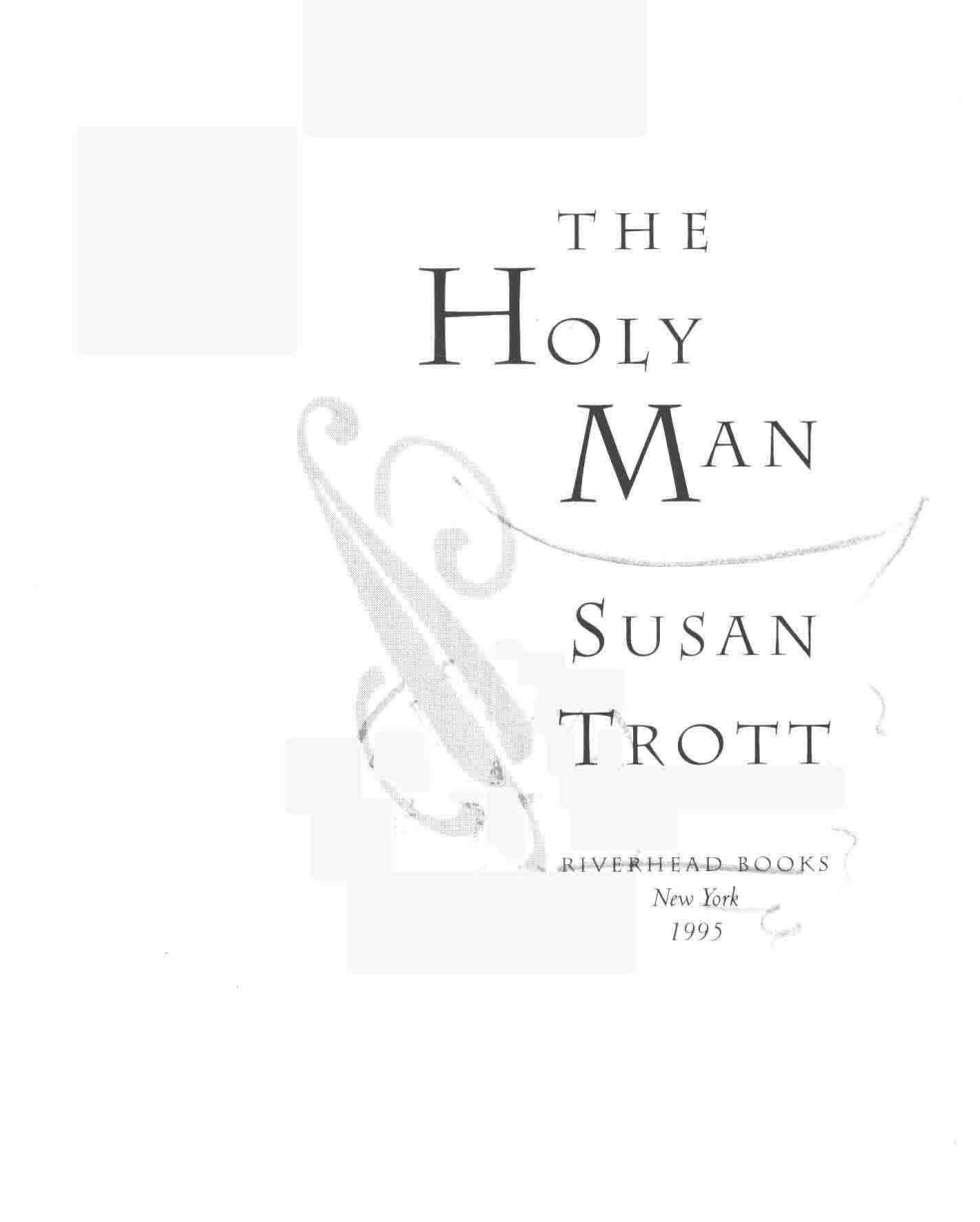


# THE HOLY MAN



SUSAN TROTT



THE  
HOLY  
MAN

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TO ROY

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## THE LINE

There was a holy man who lived in a hermitage on a mountain. Although solitary, it was not strictly a hermitage because some monks lived there with him. Even before the world began to seek him out, he was rarely alone.

When word got out about him, people came to see him during the summer months when the hermitage was accessible, first a few people, then more and more until there was a long line climbing the steep mountain path single file—tens, hundreds, and then thousands, some of whom never made it to his door before the snows came and forced their return.

There were no inns so the pilgrims had to be prepared to camp, which wasn't a hardship as the weather was warm and dry. The views were outstanding and wildflowers flanked the path. At night, the stars were dazzling. However it did take strength to carry the camping gear and food, so anyone who was frail did not attempt to see the holy man who, in any case, was not a healer.

The line moved slowly, but it moved continuously during the few hours a day he welcomed people. In fact, those who were near the head of the line and could observe were amazed by how many people he managed to see, even though they were admitted one at a time.

Sometimes the pilgrims had to step aside for one of the monks who lived with the holy man as he or she stepped rapidly and lightly up the path, carrying supplies from the town ten miles below. These men and women were easily distinguished by their wheat-colored robes.

Those in the line never saw the departing pilgrims who went out the back door and down another path to the bottom of the mountain because the upward path, which was called the Hermitage Trail, was too narrow to take two-way traffic.

# THE HERMITAGE

**T**he hermitage was a two-story, whitewashed wooden building built on a rock foundation. It was plain, rugged, and square with a peaked roof. There was no ornament—no cross on the roof, Star of David over the door, no stone Buddha in the garden. No garden for that matter. It was a no-frills hermitage.

It faced east and was a few hundred yards from the actual mountain peak. Above treeline, there were marvelous boulders strewn about, shaped by time and cataclysm, finished by rain, snow, and wind.

At the base of one boulder was a small pond, the

source of which was an underground spring, which provided pure water for the hermitage. There were many such springs on the mountain, some of which formed falls and streams that joined with rainwater and snowmelt to flow to the reservoir in the town.

Flamboyant birds and flowers adorned the gray rocks, and the sky was an unstained canvas for clouds and flyways.

When the door was opened wide, the next pilgrim in line, waiting beyond the gate, would be summoned forth by a man in a wheat-colored robe, a small, nondescript-looking person.

“Yes?” he would ask when the pilgrim reached the threshold.

“I have come to see the holy man.”

“Follow me, please.”

He or she would follow the small man through the house, along a hallway with doorways open to various rooms into which the pilgrim would peek hastily, but the monk ahead was moving so very quickly through the house that the pilgrim couldn't linger but literally had to rush after him.

In no time at all they had passed through the entire

first floor of the house and were at a large door similar to the one the pilgrim had entered. It was the back door. The monk opened it wide and said, "Goodbye."

"But I have come to see the holy man!" said the visitor plaintively.

"You have seen me," he gently replied.

And the next thing the pilgrim knew he would be outside, the door solidly closed behind him.

This is why the line moved so rapidly and how the holy man got to see so many people—or so many people got to see him. The trip through the house was twenty seconds, add another twenty for greetings and partings, another twenty for returning to the front door, and what you have is a person a minute.

Most times the holy man would add, "If you look on everyone you meet as a holy person, you will be happy," which added seven seconds.

Rushing back and forth through the house in this way was a lot of footwork for the holy man, who was seventy-two years old, so periodically he took five-minute rests.

Rarely, but sometimes, which were happy times for him, he sat down and talked to a pilgrim.

## FEELINGS

What did the pilgrims feel about being given such short shrift after their long inchworm trudge up the mountain?

Most of them, like most people everywhere, were nice. Maybe, per capita, there were more nice people in the line than elsewhere because of the nature of the destination—good people wanting to be better people.

Still, even the nicest among them, when the door shut on their departure, felt some of these feelings:

wronged, hurt, cheated, disappointed, betrayed, ill-used, angry.

But it was amazing how fleeting this letdown was because, as they stood outside the door, somewhat dazed, feeling any or all of the above, they began to review their visit to the holy man and to understand.

The door had been opened to them.

How many places would this happen in a world of peepholes, locks, bolts, and bars?

The door had been opened wide and the one-man reception committee had stood there, eyes alight, a small smile, saying, “Yes?”—a “how may I help you?” sort of yes.

Whereas the pilgrim had not greeted him at all, had not introduced himself, said hello, how are you, may I please come in, but, instead, full of his own importance, his own mission, had treated the door-opener as the lowliest servant, saying, “I’ve come to see the holy man.”

And the door-opener, realizing the visitor’s mission had already been accomplished, showed him out.

Thinking this, the pilgrim felt very sorry about his behavior and vowed that he would come again next summer and do differently.

He tried to remember what the holy man looked like and couldn't, because he hadn't looked at him. He wouldn't recognize him if the same man opened the door next year. But no matter. He would be courteous and respectful to whosoever opened the door. In fact, he would be gracious to everyone from now on, imagining that everyone was the holy man, that everyone indeed had holiness in him. This would be very hard. Still he would try. Because that was what he had learned from the holy man, and it was a huge, wonderful, staggering lesson. And it meant . . . yes it meant that even he himself was a holy person somewhat.

His heart swelled and he went down the mountain path exulting, "I have seen the holy man. I have seen him."

And as he thought this, the face of the holy man did begin to form in his mind's eye like a photograph developing because even though he hadn't looked at the man, now he knew he had seen him.

8 In the years to come, sometimes the holy man's face would flash upon his inward eye and he would feel a catch in his throat, the pricking rush of tears to his eyes,



at the sight of the beloved visage. As the years went by he felt more and more moved by his visit to the holy man which had informed his life from that day forward.